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From Yemen War to Joint Army?

Egyptian-Saudi Differences over Arab Military Cooperation

Jessica Noll and Stephan Roll

On 25 March 2015 a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states launched air strikes on Yemen to halt the advance of the Houthi movement. A few days later the summit of the Arab League decided to set up a joint Arab army. Nevertheless, the two most important Arab countries support opposing concepts for military cooperation: Egypt proposes institutionalised long-term military cooperation to increase its political weight in the region, while Saudi Arabia prefers ad hoc coalitions precisely in order to avoid long-term dependency on other countries, not least Egypt. However, the two events suggest that states in the region are stepping up military cooperation. Germany and the European Union should treat this development with scepticism. Experience shows that such collaborations tend to exacerbate rather than resolve regional conflicts.

At their summit meeting at the Egyptian resort of Sharm al-Sheikh on 28 and 29 March 2015, the members of the Arab League agreed to set up joint armed forces. According to the final declaration of the summit, the force should be capable of rapid intervention to guarantee the national sovereignty of member states and protect them against territorial threats. The proposal apparently implies a force of 40,000 encompassing all military branches. But the details remain to be clarified in a series of meetings of high-ranking military leaders over the coming four months.

Not a New Idea

Although the formation of a joint army was announced only shortly after the beginning

of the Saudi military operation against the Houthi movement in Yemen, there is no direct connection between the two events. Consequently the Arab League resolution makes no mention of the Yemen conflict. In fact, the joint army project is an Egyptian initiative that President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi first floated in February 2015 in connection with Egyptian air strikes against the so-called Islamic State in Libya.

But the idea is much older and has been discussed at intervals for decades. After the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948/49 the then seven members of the Arab League signed a collective defence agreement, promising individual and collective aid for any treaty partner who came under attack, explicitly including military support. To date, however, the treaty has remained largely inef-

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fectual, with the League mandating only multilateral military missions, for example in 1976 in Lebanon.

The only serious attempt to date to create a joint army was undertaken several decades ago in the Arabian Peninsula. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf monarchies felt their security was endangered and founded the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) in 1982, whose strength is reported to have reached 40,000 men. But plans for a joint command structure appear never to have been realised. The PSF was deployed in the Second Gulf War (1990/91) and since 2011 to suppress uprising against the monarchy in Bahrain.

Egyptian Calculations

Cairo explains its motivation to revive the project of a pan-Arab army with the terrorist threat that the region is currently facing. By doing so, the Egyptian government applies a questionable definition of terrorism that focuses largely on demonising the moderate Islamist Muslim Brotherhood.

However, security interests only in part explain the Egyptian initiative. The real reason for the Sisi administration is to expand Egypt's regional influence. With well over 400,000 on active service and almost half a million reservists, Egypt possesses by far the largest armed forces in the region. This fact alone would afford it a natural leading role in any joint army. Egypt could position itself as a permanent protector, especially for the Gulf states which – Cairo calculates – would regard the joint army as a bulwark in the festering conflict with Iran, as well as for the eventuality of internal disorder.

Given Egypt's economic problems, the timing of the initiative is not coincidental. Since the military coup in summer 2013 Cairo has manoeuvred itself into a troublesome dependency on the three Gulf monarchies Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. Since July 2013 these states have granted the new Egyptian regime

aid, loans and energy supplies amounting to more than \$23 billion – assistance that has been vital for securing Sisi's grip on power. The Gulf leaders were motivated to support the military coup by worries that a successful Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt could lead to similar developments in their own states.

In view of empty state coffers and shrinking foreign currency reserves, Egypt will remain for the foreseeable future utterly dependent on financial support from the Gulf monarchies to avoid bankruptcy. From Cairo's perspective, setting up a joint army would be a crucial step to convert one-sided dependency into mutual benefit.

Saudi Disinterest

Although the declaration of intent was signed by all twenty-two members of the Arab League, responses to the Egyptian initiative were mixed. Iraq and Tunisia expressed scepticism, while Algeria offered only to assist with training and funding. But the central obstacle is likely to be Saudi disinterest. While expressing no official doubts in public, behind the scenes the Kingdom made no secret of its opposition. The Saudi intervention in Yemen put a damper on the plan to institutionalise military cooperation under the auspices of the Arab League before it even began. Instead of seeking an Arab League mandate, Saudi Arabia launched air strikes just days before the summit, having successfully formed a coalition of nine Arab states under its leadership and gained the backing of the United States. The military contributions of its coalition partners are limited, however. Egypt, officially also a member of the coalition, only sent four warships to guard the Bab al-Mandab strait at the entrance to the Red Sea – which is strategically vital for Egypt. In view of the support it receives from the Saudi leadership, it is very striking that Egypt is not participating directly in the fighting.

The reasons for the meagre role of the Egyptian armed forces are likely to be the

same as those for Saudi disinterest in the joint force initiative. After Salman's succession to the throne following the death of his brother King Abdullah, Riyadh is plainly reassessing its partnership with Egypt. For the new leadership worries about Iranian hegemonic ambitions and a further strengthening of the (Tehran-allied) Houthi movement in Yemen have greater weight than fears of the Muslim Brotherhood. But above all, the Saudis are unlikely to have overlooked the Egyptian calculation behind its drive for institutionalisation of military cooperation. The royal family's willingness to bolster Egypt's threadbare economy indefinitely is probably extremely limited, not least because Cairo is not a particularly attractive security partner.

The Egyptian armed forces are at best capable of territorial defence in the scope of a conventional war. Besides their ability to respond to asymmetrical threats or conduct rapid military interventions is very weak. This becomes obvious in the Sinai, where the Egyptian army has been trying for years to restore the state's authority – without success. Although the leadership has been pursuing a comprehensive modernisation of the armed forces since 2011, its implementation will take years and will not improve short-term operational capability. Unlike for example Pakistan, with which Saudi Arabia has conducted close military cooperation since the 1970s, Egypt possesses no nuclear weapons that could serve purposes of deterrence in the conflict with Iran.

Outlook

The future of Arab military cooperation could depend decisively on the course of the war in Yemen. It is questionable whether the Saudi air strikes have weakened the Houthi as intended. If Saudi Arabia contemplates a broader military operation, which seems unlikely from today's perspective, it will have to rely more strongly on support from allies. Given that its traditional military partner Pakistan has shown little en-

thusiasm for the Yemen offensive, the Kingdom might find itself forced after all to seek Egyptian support. And that might also boost Egypt's initiative for a joint army. If Egypt and Saudi Arabia were to agree in principle – as the Arab world's most populous country and largest economy respectively – that would definitely send a strong political message.

But if the Egyptian contribution in Yemen remains more symbolic in nature, for example restricted to joint manoeuvres and a limited naval presence, the project of an Arab army is likely to end in nothing but talk. The respective security interests, and not least the threat scenarios of the individual countries, are too different. The Egyptian definition of terrorism in particular is contested in the region. By no means all the states there regard the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists.

Even if the follow-up process initially goes ahead, it is therefore hard to imagine the states involved agreeing to set up a common military command structure. Numerous technical obstacles would also have to be overcome, partly stemming from lack of interoperability and from differences in training and equipment.

Implications for German and European Military Cooperation

Independently of the question of the prospects of greater institutionalisation, it must be assumed that military cooperation between Arab states will increase and intensify. This is reflected in particular in the growing willingness of individual countries to participate in collective military operations to enforce their interests. But conflicts have been exacerbated rather than resolved through the joint missions. In the conflict with the protest movement in Bahrain in 2011 Saudi and Emirate forces made a decisive contribution to suppressing the opposition and preserving authoritarian structures. The air strikes against Islamist positions in Libya that the UAE conducted with Egyptian backing in 2014 served to

support the Libyan General Chalifa Haftar, but hampered necessary negotiations between the different parties in the Libyan civil war. And the intervention by the Saudi-led coalition has further destabilised Yemen. The humanitarian situation has dramatically worsened and a political solution has been made considerably more difficult.

Germany and the European Union should therefore not expect intensified military cooperation among the Arab states to automatically have a stabilising effect on the region. As long as cooperation serves primarily to secure the rule of authoritarian regimes, and in fact undermines the establishment of mechanisms for political conflict resolution, the opposite will be the case.

Arab military cooperation represents a special challenge for European security cooperation with Arab states. Arms and military know-how may end up being used in contexts for which they were not originally intended. Arab cooperation may lead to situations where recipients of military assistance become involved in activities that have nothing to do with national defence – as demonstrated lately by the participation of a series of Arab states in the Saudi intervention in Yemen. This may contradict German and European interests. More consideration should therefore be given to the implications of Arab military cooperation for arms export control.

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